

The Story of War: Four Books and Two Narratives that Follow the Iraq War from Start to (Almost) Finish

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I'll never forget my first-ever foot patrol through an Iraqi village. It was January 2008, during the height of the Surge in Iraq. We had just “cleared” the village of Mansuriyate al Jabal (we called it “Maj”). My commander wanted to meet the locals, and he wanted me to come with him.

I was the unit's JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer, and focused my efforts on detainee operations, rules of engagement, and military justice; but as a staff officer in a combat unit, I was a soldier first, and if my commander wanted me on a patrol, I'd go on a patrol. So I put on my body armor and rolled out. The drive from our base to the town was short—no more than fifteen minutes—but it felt like a thousand miles from the relative safety of an American Forward Operating Base.

There are two things that strike you about rural Iraqi towns. First, most are mired in poverty. The houses are often little more than mud huts. Garbage is thrown in the streets, and small sewage canals cut through the back alleys (and sometimes the middle of streets and sidewalks), giving the entire place a distinctive stench. Electricity flickers on and off—mostly off—and the wealthier parts of town are marked by the constant hum of generators. But it's an odd kind of poverty and hardly the absolute destitution that you see in parts of Africa. The people themselves are often well-dressed, and on occasion you'll see the markedly strange sight of a new-looking BMW or a nice minivan parked in front of a mud hut.

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The second thing that strikes you—literally—is the amazing number of children running unsupervised in the streets. As soon as we stepped out of our vehicles and started to walk across the damaged bridge that linked the town to the main road, the children came at us in waves.

By the time we got fifty yards into the town, at least a hundred kids surrounded our small patrol. I was relieved. From everything I'd heard, if the kids are swarming you, everything is fine. If their parents shoo them inside, watch out.

They wanted soccer balls and pencils. They'd push past each other, yelling, "Mister! Mister! Football! Mister! Pencil! Mister!" Then they'd ask your name. "Mister, name? Mister, name?"

"David."

"Mister, Bandar."

"Hi, Bandar."

"Mister, babies?"

"Do I have babies?" (I was asked this dozens of times.) "I have two babies."

"Mister David two babies!"

And so it went. The same boys would ask the same questions and get the same answers—again and again. Soon they started chanting at us. "Football! Football!" or "Pencil! Pencil!" Then they would chant whatever we said.

"Be quiet!"

"Quiet! Quiet!"

"Stop!"

"Stop! Stop!"

Accompanied by the swarm of kids, we approached a girls' school we'd hired a contractor to repair. We wanted to inspect his work before we made the final payment. The gate was locked. A little boy walked up to us and said, "Ali Baba?" "Ali Baba" is apparently the universal Iraqi/slang English term for doing something unlawful, and he meant that he could scale the wall and open the gate from the inside. We used it as a verb.

"Yeah, Ali Baba that gate."

That was all the encouragement that the boy—and his hundred closest friends—needed. "Ali Baba! Ali Baba!" they were chanting and clapping as five or six boys scampered up and over the wall. The gate opened, and we walked into the courtyard, then into the school, leaving the swarm of children behind.

After a brief meeting with the contractor and school principal, we left the school and were swarmed by the children once again. The chanting was almost deafening. As we walked by the soccer field, a ball came rolling toward us. To the kids' infinite delight, the squadron commander stopped the ball with his boot, lined up, and kicked it in the general direction of the goal.

Laughing, we turned away and started to walk down a narrow street heading toward the newer area of town.

Then a rock the size of a softball whizzed by my head.

Instantly, we raised our weapons, looking for the source of the rock. The kids froze, then scattered. Another rock flew by. Then another missed the platoon sergeant's head by mere inches. Within seconds, the once lively streets were deserted, and more rocks were whizzing past. My heart was pounding.

We located the source—a group of five or six angry-looking young teenagers who were ducking behind a wall after each throw. One raised his arm and hurled a rock straight at my commander. It missed, but not by much. These rocks were hardly deadly weapons, but if they hit us in the face, we'd have broken jaws or other bones, and more than one rock-throwing incident had escalated into deadly firefights as teenagers baited troops into preset ambushes.

In other words, our squadron commander's next decision could have long-lasting consequences—for me, for the other soldiers in our small patrol, for the kids throwing rocks, and for the fate of the people of "Maj." What would he choose to do?

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When we think of American warfare we generally tend to remember its great battles and grand strategic maneuvers—think Washington's set-piece battles against Cornwallis or Howe, Grant's epic confrontations with Lee, or the glorious stand by the 101st Airborne at Bastogne. The commands given—defend this town, take that hill—are based on purely military considerations, spawned from the minds of generals, and dependent on the ingenuity and courage of the individual soldiers and small-unit commanders to accomplish. The historical debates center on the wisdom the generals' orders (should Lee have ordered Pickett's frontal attack?) and are often top-down in focus.

But as the Iraq War winds down, how should it be analyzed? Was it fought in more or less the traditional way, with the proper strategy properly

executed? (After all, it took Lincoln quite some time to find the right general, with the right strategy.) Or was something different in play? Did the right strategy actually bubble up from the lowest levels, with the generals finally catching up to the innovations and recommendations of company commanders and battalion commanders? After all, in Iraq, the order “take that town” was more likely to be “secure the location, rebuild infrastructure, foster relationships with tribal communities, and construct enduring democratic institutions.”

After serving a year in Iraq (substantially less time than many served), including during much of the Surge, I can tell you that the question of whether the dominant history of the war was of top-down adjustments or bottom-up innovation was a matter of lively debate. Officers who fought in Najaf in 2005 were often surprised to hear media reports that population-protections was a “new” strategy or that American troops were “suddenly” learning how to fight in Iraq. Others noted real differences from previous deployments, and the only constant was disagreement.

Historians who analyze the arc of the Iraq War can do worse than start with four books by two authors: Bing West and Thomas Ricks. Each book is outstanding in its own way, and the authors have a healthy respect for each other, but one can’t help but be struck by the distinct differences in approach. West looks at the war from the G.I. up, Ricks from the generals down.

First, read *Fiasco* by Thomas Ricks (Penguin Press, 2006) and *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* by Bing West (Bantam, 2005). With *Fiasco*, Ricks—the Pentagon correspondent for the *Washington Post*—wrote the Iraq War’s single most influential mid-war book. A correspondent with a keen eye for military detail, a man who took incalculable risks to walk Iraqi streets time and time again as security deteriorated, Ricks grasped early on the flaws at the top of the American military command pyramid. His central thesis, that the American military was fighting a war it wasn’t trained to fight according to a strategy that was fundamentally disconnected from the reality on the ground—became tough to dispute by the time Iraq reached its nadir with the sectarian bloodshed of 2006.

Whereas Ricks takes issues at the top and then filters his way down through the ranks to show the real-world effects of faulty strategies, West, a former Marine officer and Reagan administration official, hones in on the dusty, bloody streets of Fallujah and Ramadi. West takes the reader into the decision-making process of the brigade and battalion commanders, down even to company

commanders and platoon sergeants, as he focuses like a laser on the heart of the Sunni insurgency. Even today, as I read *No True Glory* I hear the echoes of my own worst days in Iraq, the grandiose promises of many local Iraqis contrasted with their grotesque incompetence and (understandable) fear, the feeling that you were never *quite* allowed to finish the fight, and the sense of grinding, impossibly complex, perpetual conflict.

At the same time, whereas Ricks leaves the reader with a feeling of despair, West makes us believe that the guys closest to the ground knew a better way, were trying a better way, and could achieve results. Ricks looks at the morass and sees, well, a fiasco. West looks at the morass and sees frustrated possibility.

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Then came the Surge, al Qaeda's defeat, Muqtadr al-Sadr's marginalization, and later another book each from Ricks and West. West's, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq* (Random House, 2008), picks up from *No True Glory* and makes a point that discussions of Bush, Cheney, Petraeus, and Odierno often overlook: soldiers and marines who were returning again and again to the same ground were learning and adapting independently of changes at the top. With his keen understanding of the extent of a commander's level of autonomy and the process of transitioning from one unit to another (what we called a "RIP" or Relief In Place), West perceived an organic and evolutionary process of war-fighting. Over time, reliable allies emerged, and commanders no longer had to rely on grandiose assurances, but instead had a historical record to build on, and they—most importantly—began to *understand* Iraq and Iraqis (at least to the extent that anyone can).

Through West's eyes the reader watches the evolution of a war, not a revolution, where constant pressure from the ground up made Generals Petraeus and Odierno not only the right men at the right time (there's no doubt of that), but also the beneficiaries of an enormous amount of wisdom. And this wisdom came from the youngest NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) all the way up to the battle-hardened commanders on their third tour—first as a company commander, then as a brigade operations officer, and finally as a battalion commander leading hundreds of men and controlling sometimes thousands of square kilometers.

In *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (Penguin Press, 2009), Ricks takes the more classic approach of the military historian: examining the fortunes of war first and foremost through the strategic decisions of the ultimate military decision-makers, and then through the tactical effects of those decisions on the men on the ground. Because he focuses so much on the contrast between the “fiasco” of 2003–2005, Ricks in some ways does a better job of communicating the theory and reality of COIN, counterinsurgency doctrine. *The Gamble* presents a big picture view that shows precisely how a “clear, hold, and build” or “protect the population” COIN approach differs from earlier strategic concepts. It also shows how the adoption of COIN tactics actually *increased* violence over the short term (a reality my unit experienced in a profound way) by injecting American units directly into al Qaeda-infested neighborhoods, increasing foot patrols (like the one I describe above), and providing the right amount of flexibility in the rules of engagement—flexibility that allowed soldiers greater freedom to initiate combat.

Critically, Ricks lays out the ways in which the Surge was a true political, diplomatic, and cultural gamble. Militarily, however, the Surge represented the application of *proven* counter-insurgency tactics—tactics learned (and forgotten) in Vietnam and relearned at great cost in the deserts of Iraq.

While General Petraeus is the hero of popular legend, Ricks tracks the evolution of General Ray Odierno from, in Ricks’s opinion, a disastrous leader in his first deployment (as painfully detailed in *Fiasco*) into perhaps the general who deserves even more credit than Petraeus for the concept and success of the Surge. Yet, again, the emphasis is top-down, the flip side of the Bing West coin.

I suspect, if the general field of military history is any indication, that future historians may prefer Ricks’s approach to West’s, but that could be a mistake. The small-unit commander has always played a vital role in war. It’s difficult to comprehend the courage, innovation, and charisma required to lead men in battle—and while the lieutenant staring at the endless gray waves sweeping across the fields of Gettysburg or the Marine captain wading ashore at Iwo Jima were indispensable to the war effort, it was their personal levels of initiative and creativity that helped shape the American war machine. And that initiative and creativity was/is fully operative in the very different war in Iraq. Pacifying, controlling, and building a sometimes several hundred-square-mile section of countryside or a tightly packed urban

neighborhood—all while under constant threat from insurgents who are sometimes indistinguishable from allies—represents an entirely different kind of challenge. And the strategies mandated from Washington and then Baghdad represent not the independent inspiration of the best and the brightest, but often the reflection of the accumulated wisdom of the young officer and NCO in the field.

* * *

“Did you see who threw that rock?” My squadron commander’s eyes narrowed and his slow Southern drawl turned harsh.

“Yes sir!” The platoon sergeant was staring straight at a teenage boy sprinting about fifty meters away. “That older kid in white.”

“Well, let’s take him to his father.”

“Yes sir!” Several troopers dashed forward to grab him, and I jogged along behind, scanning the rooftops for any sign of snipers. We passed a narrow alley, and I saw three men of military age, wearing all black, glaring at me. The streets were still empty.

As we ran, the young boy stayed about fifty meters ahead. Every few moments, he’d look back, see us still following him, and run harder. A thought ran through my mind: “baited ambush.” But it was no such thing. He was just a scared kid, and he ran straight back to his house. Seconds after he ran through the door of his small mud hut, the squadron commander was knocking on his door.

The boy’s father opened the door to the sight of virtually an entire platoon of American soldiers standing at his doorstep. If I wasn’t still fearing for my life and trying to catch my breath after my run/jog (carrying seventy-five pounds of weapons, ammunition, and body armor) through town, I would’ve laughed.

The Iraqi’s eyes were wide with surprise and fear, and his son (who looked to be thirteen or fourteen years old) was huddled behind him, almost as if he was trying to hide in the folds of his dishdasha.

“Sir, your son has disrespected me,” said the squadron commander. (All conversations in English with Iraqis occurred through a translator.)

“Surely not.” The man was panicked. The boy’s mother appeared, glaring at us through the door.

“He threw a rock at my men. Do you believe that’s acceptable?”

At that moment, the boy spoke up. He was speaking rapidly until his mother smacked him on the side of the head.

“It is not acceptable. I am sorry.” The father glared at his son, and the mother smacked him on the side of the head again.

The squadron commander looked at the family for a moment. No one said anything. I was trying to monitor the conversation even as I kept scanning the streets. People were starting to come back out of their houses. I saw a child or two peek around the corner.

“Thank you for your apology. Is there anything we can do for you?”

I couldn’t hear the response as I moved further away from the door to get a better view of a nearby alley. But there was quite a stir in the house, and after a few moments, the father appeared again—holding a little girl with deformed legs. His daughter.

The squadron commander signaled for the medic to come over. The medic carefully and gently touched her legs.

“Sir, I think it’s a birth defect. I can’t do anything. Can we send her to our doctor?”

The squadron commander scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to the young father. “Sir, this is a note from me that will allow you to bring your daughter to our base to see one of our doctors. I don’t think there’s anything we can do, but you can get good medical care and good advice.”

The man was extremely grateful. The tension was over, and the children were back. And then, almost as if on cue, the sick and the lame from the village came pouring out of their homes. Our medic was overwhelmed, as he was suddenly treating terrible burns, hacking coughs, and high fevers. The medic looked at each patient while the kids chanted and played, and we pulled security.

After about thirty minutes, my commander walked up and said, “Well, lawyer, should we head back?”

“If you’d like to, Sir.”

I often look back at that first patrol as a microcosm of the myriad choices our soldiers had to make every day. Refuse to acknowledge the stones, and you risk injury and look weak. Overreact to the stoning, and your brutality alienates the population and either drives them closer to the insurgents or a sullen distance away. But if you respond correctly, you can show strength and compassion at the same time, and that was the ultimate challenge of the Iraq War.

As I look back now at a deployment with a unit that endured thirty-six-hour firefights, hundreds of encounters with IEDs (Improvised Explosive

Devices), and a shocking rate of casualties, it was the sum total of those choices—properly made—that liberated our section of Iraq. For the jihad, the closed fist; for the people, an open hand. And while the generals gave us their commands, the overall contours of a strategy, and the rules of engagement that freed our hands, even the best-laid plans would have failed if not for the right choices at the right times in the villages and neighborhoods of a violent and fractious nation.